

October 15, 2020

**To: House Committee on Public Health**

**From:**

Rachel Cooper, Senior Policy Analyst, on behalf of

**Every Texan (formerly CPPP)**

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Dear Chairwoman Thompson and Members of the Committee:

Every Texan (formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Request for Information from the House Committee on Public Health. We focus on policies that will enable Texans of all backgrounds to thrive. The Benedictine Sisters of Boerne, Texas, founded Every Texan (formerly CPPP) in 1985 to advance public policy solutions for expanding access to health care. We became an independent, tax-exempt organization in 1999. Today, we prioritize policies that will measurably improve equity in and access to health care, food security, education, and financial security. We are based in Austin, Texas, and work statewide.

**Topics: This document addresses Interim Charge 2. As requested by the committee, response to other Public Health charges will be submitted in separate documents.**

**Interim Charge #2: Review how Texas is preparing for state and federal budgetary changes that impact the state's health programs, including: the Family First Prevention Services Act;** the next phase of the 1115 Healthcare Transformation and Quality Improvement Program Waiver; Texas' Targeted Opioid Response Grant; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services proposed Medicaid Fiscal Accountability rule, and the Healthy Texas Women Section 1115 Demonstration Waiver.

**Federal Funding Opportunities for Kinship Navigator Programs**

Through a provision of the [Family First Prevention Services Act \(Family First\)](#), states can receive federal reimbursement for up to 50% of their expenditures to provide Kinship Navigator Programs that meet certain evidence-based requirements approved by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse of promising, supported or well-supported practices. This federal support is available regardless of whether the children for whom the services are being accessed meet certain income eligibility requirements for Title IV-E foster care funding.

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*To establish a Kinship Navigator Program that can meet the evidence-based requirements of Family First we recommend that the state invest \$2 million in general funds for the 2022-2023 biennium. Combined with existing federal funds, Texas can establish a basic statewide navigator program and pilot a more robust program to be expanded throughout the state.*

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While the Clearinghouse as of September 2020 has not approved a Kinship Navigator Program model for federal reimbursement, DFPS has received navigator grants of over \$1 million annually in federal funds since 2018. The intent of this money is to help the state to plan, develop and evaluate a navigator program to meet the evidence-based standards in the Family First Act. By investing now in the development of a robust Kinship Navigator Program that meets the needs of Texas families, DFPS will be able to draw down ongoing federal funding from Title IV-E of the Social Security Act once the Clearinghouse approves a navigator program model.

### **Definition of Kinship Navigator Programs**

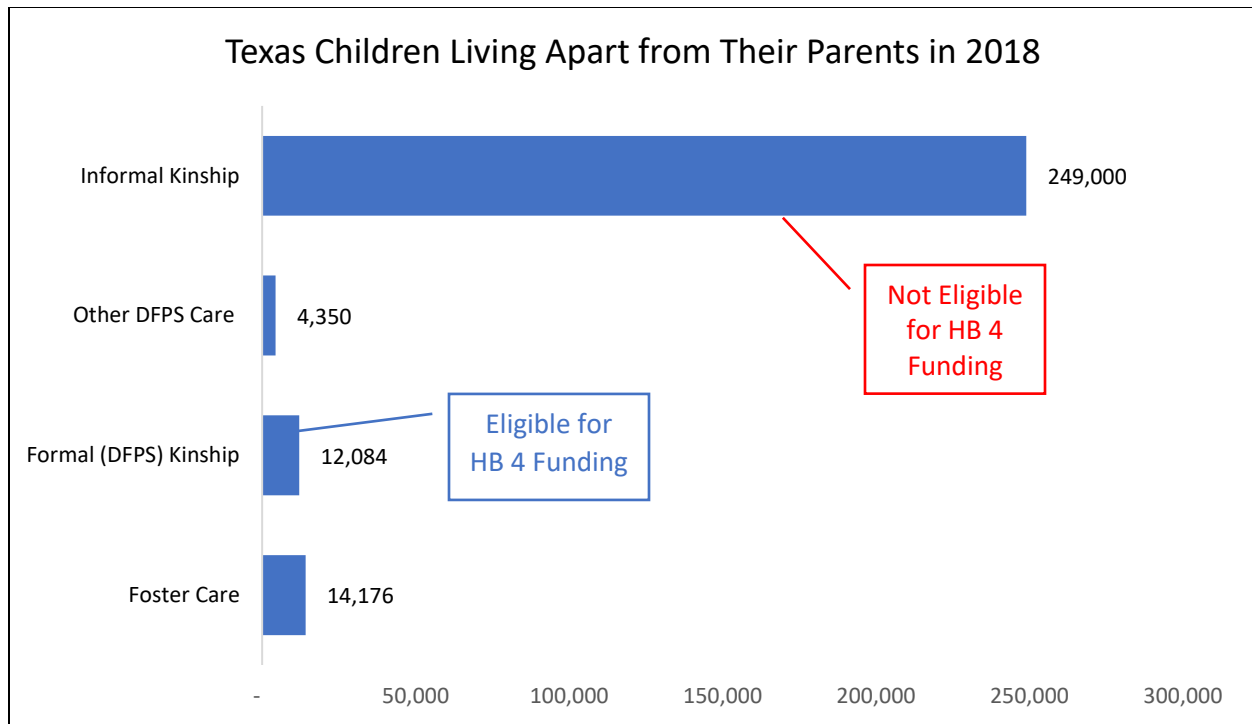
There are many definitions, but Kinship Navigator Programs are essentially initiatives that provide information, referral, and follow-up services to grandparents and other relatives raising children to link them to the benefits and services that they or the children need. Kinship Navigator Programs also sensitize agencies and providers to the needs of relative-headed families.

### **Kinship Care in Texas**

During the 85<sup>th</sup> session, the Legislature acknowledged the critical role grandparents and other family members play in keeping children out of foster care by passing HB 4 which established a kinship care payment for families actively involved with the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). While an important improvement, the payment unfortunately does not apply to the families with closed Child Protective Services (CPS) cases, or who took in their young family member before CPS got involved, even as families struggle financially.

There are nearly 250,000 children in Texas being raised by kin who are not eligible for the financial assistance offered by HB 4. While relatives of all types step up to become caregivers, 71 percent of children with a kin caregiver in Texas are living with a grandparent, and 46 percent are in low-income families that struggle to support them. Kinship caregiving crosses racial lines. Among low-income kinship households, 47 percent are Hispanic, 27 percent are White, and 26 percent are African-American.

Despite living in similar circumstances as Formal Kinship Care (involved with DFPS) families, currently grandparents and other relatives in Informal Kinship Care (DFPS is not involved) who experience significant financial, health and social hardships when they suddenly take on the responsibility of caring for their young relatives are not eligible for any services or funding from DFPS.



Source: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and Kids Count Data Center

### Establishing a Texas Kinship Navigator Program

Although they are not eligible for DFPS funding or services, the 250,000 Texas children living in Informal Kinship families may be eligible for local, state and federal benefits and services. But many kinship caregivers, especially grandparents, are overwhelmed and not aware of the programs they might be eligible for or how to access them. When asked they report needing help:

*Help to apply for Medicaid/TANF/Food stamps. Paperwork that we'll need to be able to take our grandchildren to doctors and enrolling them in school. Getting help finding organizations that might be able to help with beds/bedding for multiple children. School uniforms and supplies. Understanding the system! Some of the legalese can get very overwhelming. Explanations of options when it comes to possibly fostering and/or adoptions and any possible financial assistance with these processes. -Texas Kinship Grandmother*

This lack of information leads to families struggling to provide a stable household for the children in their care. The creation of a Kinship Navigator Program within DFPS would help families access benefits and services and keep their children out of the foster care system.

### Requirements of Kinship Navigator Programs under Federal Law

The law specifies that Kinship Navigator Programs must meet the following requirements in order to receive federal funding support:

- Must be coordinated with other State or local agencies that promote service coordination or provide information and referral services, including the entities that provide 2–1–1 or 3–1–1 information systems.
- Must be planned and operated in consultation with kinship caregivers and organizations representing them.
- Must establish information and referral systems that link (via toll-free access) kinship caregivers, kinship support group facilitators, and kinship service providers:
  - to each other;
  - eligibility and enrollment information for Federal, State, and local benefits;
  - relevant training to assist kinship caregivers in caregiving and in obtaining benefits and services; and
  - relevant legal assistance and help in obtaining legal services.
- Must provide outreach to kinship care families, including by establishing, distributing, and updating a kinship care website, or other relevant guides or outreach materials.

### **Steps Taken To Date**

Since receiving federal funding in 2018, DFPS has started the process of developing a Kinship Navigator Program in Texas that is laid out in the [Family First Prevention Services Act Strategic Plan](#). Federal funding was used to contract researchers from the University of Houston to examine the infrastructure needed to support a Kinship Navigator Program in Texas, as well as the projected costs to implement and sustain the program. The review included an assessment of current services available to kinship families, gaps in resources, and costs associated to implement and sustain a Kinship Navigator Program.

Based on the UofH study, DFPS has used its existing funds to collaborate with HHSC 2-1-1 to enhance services to kinship families across Texas by improving equipment as well as training related to cultural competency, kinship, and trauma informed care to enhance support 2-1-1 staff provide for kinship caregivers.

DFPS is also using federal grant funds to support a pilot that will strengthen the connections between Family Resource Centers (FRCs) and a Kinship Navigator Program. FRCs are community-based resource hubs where families can access formal and informal supports to promote their health and well-being. The FRC model seeks to provide services to children and families, increase parenting skills and protective factors, and reduce the likelihood of formal involvement with CPS.

### **Recommendations for the Texas Legislature**

To build on the work that DFPS has already begun to establish a Kinship Navigator Program that can meet the evidence-based requirements of Family First and qualify for federal matching funds in the future, we recommend that the state invest \$2 million in general revenue for the 2022-2023 biennium. Combined with the existing kinship navigator federal funds, Texas can establish a basic statewide navigator program and pilot a more robust program that can be expanded throughout the state.

A basic statewide kinship navigator model would include these components:

#### **1. Enhanced 211**

Regional 211 centers would employ operators specially trained to handle kinship family issues.

The kinship navigator would:

- Provide basic information about potential eligibility for services.
- Give referrals to services listed in the 211 Texas database.

**2. Enhanced Legal Assistance**

The state would contract with the Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC) to refocus their existing Kincare Taskforce to provide direct legal assistance for kinship households. TLSC lawyers would be able to assist families with legal matters like custody arrangements, fair hearings for public benefit denials as well as other issues.

**3. Navigator Website**

A dedicated Texas Kinship Navigator website would be created and maintained. The site would include information on basic issues relevant to kinship families.

**4. Support Group Funding**

A small pool of funding would be made available to encourage local groups to create and maintain support groups for kinship caregivers and their children.

In addition to the basic statewide navigator, a more robust model designed to meet the evidence-based requirements of Family First, which would ensure federal matching funds, should be added. DFPS's current pilot with the Family Resource Centers would build upon the statewide program in the selected regions and should include:

**5. Case Management**

If an Enhanced 211 operator working with a caller determines that they need additional assistance, they would be referred to a local agency funded to provide direct case management for kinship families. The kinship navigator would:

- Open cases with families allow for repeat follow-up until the need is met.
- Assist families in the enrollment process for services.
- Act as a client representative when requested.

With a relatively small investment of \$2 million in general revenue (\$4 million all funds), the Legislature can finally offer some assistance to the 250,000 children being raised by a relative in Texas and help stabilize their placements to keep them out of the foster care system.